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Was He Xavier's Greatest Professor?

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Was He Xavier's Greatest Professor?

Imagine: An almost-forty-year old would-be immigrant arrives in Cincinnati from war-ravaged Germany late in 1954. A widower recently bereft of his beloved partner, the son of a father who perished in World War I and a mother who died during World War II, he has a nine-year-old son with him, whom he supports by working long hours as a file clerk with the Southern Railroad. The single father and his son live in the railroad's downtown Cincinnati employee hostel. He has no college credits, let alone a college degree.

And yet this man, Karl P. Wentersdorf, against all odds would become arguably Xavier's finest scholar-teacher.

Getting Started

Leave aside his academic accomplishments for the moment, if you will: Karl Wentersdorf's personal history is remarkable enough.

Born in the Oberschlesien region (Upper Silesia), then a part of the German Empire but since 1945 a part of southwestern Poland,¹ KPW never knew his father, who died in action in 1917. His mother, an English teacher in Germany, sent young Karl to be educated in a private school near London, overseen by his aunts, from 1923 to 1930, so that he could become fluent in both

German and English before returning home to experience the demise of the Weimar Republic. Having come to maturity just as Adolph Hitler was coming to his maniacal power, he married Anna Jankowski and worked, without enthusiasm or commitment, in German intelligence during the war: his job, he told me, was to listen to radio broadcasts from England and to intercept American communications with the Soviets to learn what he could about troop movements and so forth. (For instance, he heard Edward R. Murrow reporting from North Africa and from the Eastern Front.)

When the war ended, Wentersdorf put his bilingualism to good use. He and his wife took jobs near Marburg as translators for American G.I.s who were occupying Germany. In 1947 the two adopted their eighteen-month-old son, Antonius, but then Anna contracted a virulent ovarian cancer. Though the Americans, fond of all three Wentersdorfs, tried to assist as best they could by arranging experimental medical treatments,² Anna died in January 1951, leaving Karl and his son alone and devastated amid the ruins of post-war Germany.

But not completely alone. The Americans helped care for young Tony, and they suggested that Karl consider beginning a new life in the United States. One G.I., Jim Ahlrichs, offered to arrange for his father in Cincinnati to “sponsor” Karl—i.e., to ensure that he had a job—if he wanted to emigrate. And so in October, 1954, Karl Wentersdorf and Tony arrived in historically German-

American Cincinnati. (Wentersdorf always remembered with gratitude those who assisted his emigration, and appreciated that U. S. policy permitted him to come to America. Later he himself sponsored the family of Arnold Euler, a printer and close friend, who joined Karl in Cincinnati and later included him and Tony in Christmas celebrations and other holidays.)

In January 1955, while working fulltime as a file clerk for the railroad at the age of almost forty, Karl began taking night courses at Xavier's Evening College in downtown Cincinnati. In his first term, after working during the day and taking undergraduate courses on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings (and Saturday mornings), he amassed twenty credits (!) with superior grades, and his professors couldn't overlook his genius. ("They noticed that I was well read," he told me, with characteristic understatement.) To their everlasting credit, the Jesuits admitted him for masters' study immediately—he never did receive a bachelors' degree.

Then, just as summer classes were beginning in 1956, there was an unexpected resignation on the English faculty. Someone all of a sudden was needed to teach Introduction to Drama, so Karl was hired to do it—"They asked me on Friday and the course began on Monday!" he told me. And when that went well, he was hired again for the fall semester, even before his MA was officially complete. (He finished the M.A. in January, 1957.) That's correct: Karl

Wentersdorf arrived at night school, with no degree, in January of 1955, and two years later he was a member of the Xavier faculty.

But that was just the beginning. He was offered the Xavier job with the understanding that he would go on for his PhD, something he was now planning to do so anyhow. While teaching fulltime at Xavier and supporting his young son as a single parent, he somehow completed the PhD in English at the University of Cincinnati in May 1960. With the support and encouragement of Karl Kreider (who directed his dissertation) and William Clark (an Americanist), Wentersdorf wrote his dissertation on the authorship of the quasi-Shakespearean play *Edward III*. He based his argument on an examination of image clusters, a topic that continued to hold his interest for years.

From no degree to the PhD in five years, while working fulltime and parenting his son: he was on his way.

The Scholar

No doubt one reason that he had impressed Xavier officials was that as a young married father in post-war Germany, Wentersdorf had somehow managed to coauthor a book, *Shakespeare and Catholicism*, in partnership with a prominent German scholar, Heinrich Mutschmann.³ I have no idea how that partnership began or unfolded, but without a doubt it initiated Karl Wentersdorf

into academic scholarship and encouraged his plans. With Mutschmann doubtless as a model, he would go on to establish a remarkable scholarly career.

Beginning in his mid-forties, KPW would publish, according to World Catalogue, in the next quarter century well over a hundred scholarly articles (not counting numerous reviews). His research touched often on Shakespeare (he had gotten hooked as a teenager on *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Merchant of Venice*) but also on Chaucer, on *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry, on Dickens (he loved the villains), on his special favorite among modern dramatists Eugene O'Neill, and on other works of twentieth-century drama. Many of the articles solved problems in philology—the meaning of old words—but he also contributed to studies in folklore, criticism, and stage history, among other topics. KPW never completed the books that he planned, including one on the itinerant drama companies that circulated in England as Shakespeare was in his teens, but those journal articles amounted to hundreds and hundreds of pages—the equivalent of a dozen books.

But if the range and quantity of his research were superb, so was its quality. Wentersdorf's articles typically appeared in professional journals that publish only the very finest work in the field of English literature, the kind of journals associated with the most noted and respected scholars, the ones that accept fewer than ten percent of all submissions, the places whose articles are

most widely read and cited. A 1965 essay in *PMLA*, the most prestigious publisher in the humanities, set the pattern, and in the years that followed KPW would appear in *Studies in Philology* (at least a half dozen times), the *Journal of English and German Philology*, *College English*, *Studies in English Literature*, *Speculum*, *English Literary History*, *American Literature*, and the like—places that count among their contributors the best scholars in all of English studies. Since he relished Shakespeare, he regularly contributed to *Shakespeare Quarterly* (he loved to clear up conundrums related to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and the history plays, but he was also an expert on *Measure for Measure*, *Twelfth Night*, and other comedies). Wentersdorf's articles on Milton appeared in *Milton Quarterly*, and, as Google Scholar attests, his many essays on Chaucer are still regularly cited.

Xavier President Albert DiUlio, S.J., for good reason, therefore, on the occasion of Wentersdorf's retirement in 1987, wrote that the university had taken the highly unusual step of granting him "the signal honor" of being named Distinguished Professor Emeritus, for "surely your scholarly accomplishments have come to be recognized throughout the western world."

After his son Tony graduated from Xavier and went out on his own (he is a writer, storyteller, musician, songwriter, and music teacher in Minneapolis), often KPW went back to Europe to do his research, usually accompanied by XU alumni and their spouses. Once he traveled to Ireland to look for the sources and

analogues of some of Chaucer's tales (he loved the place, and you could always make him happy by asking him to tell you about pear tree stories). Another time he somehow talked his way into secret Vatican archives to learn about clandestine marriage laws that formed the background to scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*.⁴ When I enrolled in a Chaucer course in graduate school, I learned that Wentersdorf's class lectures on Chaucer—the most enjoyable course I ever took--derived from articles that he was publishing right and left. The man had no end of ideas: as I was getting started in my own career as a faculty member, he paid me the compliment of giving me half a dozen folders on topics that he knew he would were marketable but that he would never get around to completing.⁵ He was mentoring me just as Professor Mutschmann had mentored him.

The Teacher

Remarkably, Wentersdorf produced all of his articles while employing inter-library loan to compensate for his remove from a top research library and while carrying a four-course-a-semester teaching commitment. (My own university considers itself devoted to research and graduate education, so faculty in English typically teach three or four courses *per year*, not per semester, to allow faculty to produce a fraction of the research that Wentersdorf was publishing each year.) And yet if you were fortunate enough to be in one of his classes, you

would never imagine that his research was ever distracting him from his teaching.

I got hooked on Wentersdorf when by chance I took his “Survey of British Literature to 1800” course. His lectures were so interesting, informal, and informed that I then decided to take his year-long Shakespeare course and later a small seminar on Chaucer, even though I was an econ major. In my memory, at least, I never missed a Wentersdorf class; they hooked me so thoroughly that I decided to pursue further studies in English after graduation. Often, of course, his research fed his teaching—he would lecture with his publications to work from, though none of us dreamed that was the source of his commentary. But while he relied on lecturing as opposed to employing the more contemporary approach of class discussion, no one minded. The lectures were always so enlightening. And his exams ensured that students were reading the material thoroughly and carefully—and ensured that getting an A grade from him was rare (something I achieved only on my fourth attempt).

While he dressed rather formally, always in coat and tie, with professorial wire-rim glasses, and with a large professorial briefcase at his side, Wentersdorf was anything but remote from his students. He made sure his material was fresh and engaging (even in his favorite “History of the English Language” course), he invited students to his office hours, and he loved fielding students’ questions and

comments. He appreciated that his rollicking Chaucer course also met the requirement for a “Christian culture” course (there is room in Chaucer’s heaven for everyone, but Chaucer was also profoundly familiar with human imperfection); and he loved teaching *Hamlet* to undergrads, for his research had convinced him that the title character was about eighteen years old, roughly the age of his Xavier students. That reminds me: Once some of my classmates questioned KPW’s contention that Hamlet’s reference to “country matters” in one of his conversations with Ophelia was an obscene pun that underscored Hamlet’s cruelty to her. Karl laughed at the objection, said he “could document that!” and then took the occasion to elaborate, with relish, when the students persisted in their doubt. It seems that one of the more prudish members of the Xavier community nevertheless approved the teaching of even the more ribald moments in Shakespeare’s plays on the grounds that no one could understand the R-rated parts—whereupon Wentersdorf said he was now dedicated to explaining all the dirty puns whenever he could!

As informative as his lectures were, much of Wentersdorf’s teaching took place outside the classroom. As moderator of *The Athenaeum*, the campus creative writing magazine, he participated as well in the activities of the Mermaid Tavern, a student organization that drew together those with a special interest in creative writing. And so when the highly respected moderator of Mermaid

Tavern, Paul Sweeney, S.J., gave up the job of moderating the group after 33 years, in 1964, the job fell to Wentersdorf, who then presided over the weekly meetings until 1971 and compiled its archive: *Tavernalia: Being the Records of the New Mermayde Tavern of Xavier University*.

I'm one of those who participated in Mermaid Tavern, from 1968 through 1970, and one of those who remembers the experience as perhaps the best thing offered at Xavier. In one sense, the two-dozen-or-so Taverners operated as a kind of fraternity, complete with an initiation ceremony, "secret" pseudonyms borrowed from Elizabethan times (I was "Thomas Dekker Selzer"), a meeting place in the basement of a house near campus, continuing traditions, and a set of customs and expectations for participants that built camaraderie and commitment. But more immediately, Mermaid Tavern served as a serious and very special outside-the-classroom opportunity for students interested in literature and in writing to learn under Wentersdorf's guidance. As "Warder Will Davenant" he presided over each meeting (Taverners would read their works in progress to the group, and then take suggestions and criticisms); organized opportunities for past Taverners to meet current ones; kept the conversations serious without being too serious; and invited us to his apartment once a year⁶ to relax, listen to music, and mix with him informally. He loved engaging with engaged students; no wonder so many Taverners formed lasting

friendships with each other and with Wentersdorf.

And no wonder Wentersdorf received the Alpha Sigma Nu Teacher of the Year Award in 1965 and Xavier's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1969.

Wentersdorf's colleagues subsequently established in his honor the Karl P.

Wentersdorf Shakespeare Award, still presented each year to a deserving undergraduate.

The Citizen

Wentersdorf was almost universally respected by his faculty colleagues, who were in awe of his intellect and his scholarship, and appreciative of his collegiality and willingness to stand up for faculty interests. (The exceptions were a few administrators who objected to his ambitious grading policies and to the efforts of KPW, Father Thomas Savage, and others to make English the most demanding and respected major on campus.) Never one to flout his accomplishments, unpretentious and often self-deprecating, he resisted the title "Doctor" or "Professor": "'Karl' was always good enough for him," recalled his long-time colleague Joseph Wessling. After earning promotion to associate professor in record time, in 1962, his colleagues elected him to the Faculty Committee, an advisory group to the president that was comprised of seven top faculty. He performed his other collegial duties generously, advising his share of

undergraduates, participating in curricular reform committees, serving frequently on rank-and-tenure committee, and acting as faculty adviser to *The Athenaeum* from 1962 through 1967. He had a reputation for deliberating carefully and for listening to his colleagues carefully, especially if they had aspirations to enhance Xavier's academic reputation.

But he could certainly get riled up when the situation called for it. In April of 1970, for example, the *Xavier News* reported on its front page about the so-called "Clerical Abuses" scandal. Springtime on college campuses is always full of activism, and the 1969-1970 school year had already witnessed the first Earth Day; a "moratorium" day in the fall, when classes were cancelled to accommodate a day-long debate about the war in Vietnam; the first draft lottery; an appearance on campus by The Chicago Seven; and controversial campaigns to admit women to Xavier, to lower the voting age to eighteen, and to make ROTC participation voluntary. In May, after protests across the country followed U.S. incursions into Cambodia, national guardsmen would kill four students at Kent State. In that environment, students were especially irreverent toward The Establishment and protective of free speech, and the spring 1970 issue of *The Atheneum* published "The Clerical Abuses of Putnam County Kentucky," a fabliau in the tradition of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" that made fun of its protagonist, a priest.

When a member of the community objected to the “obscene” and “blasphemous” story and called for its censorship, it caused a mini-furor. Copies of *The Athenaeum*, which were customarily made freely available across campus, were nowhere to be found—Had they been confiscated? By whom? Was the story really obscene? Should the publication be recalled and its editors disciplined? To settle the matter, the university’s Publications Committee conducted an hours-long hearing, during which students, faculty, and members of the community sounded off. It sounds pretty tame now, but the controversy provoked plenty of attention and made the hilarious story famous for a time, until Kent State directed attention to more serious matters.

Wentersdorf was the most committed and articulate defender of the story and its publication. In part he couldn’t countenance censorship on a college campus. Nor could he accept the idea that a satiric fabliau could somehow infect the moral fiber of the community. After his reasoned and impassioned oral testimony—“My wife is no longer with us, but I am quite sure she would have enjoyed the story and not been scandalized by it in the least”—the committee dismissed all objections and closed deliberations.

But Wentersdorf wasn’t through. To ensure that such a controversy would never recur at Xavier on his watch and suspecting that the person objecting to the story was a crony of President Paul O’Connor, S.J., he composed and directed a

series of six lengthy scholarly letters to the president and the Publications Committee over the next six months. To the charge that the fabliau “lacked redeeming social values” and prostituted the artistic and educational goals of the university, Wentersdorf offered a repudiation of recent efforts to censor *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *A Doll’s House*; a scholarly history of the fabliau that tied it to the culture of high Christianity in medieval Europe; and testimony that associated Chaucer’s fabliau with his highest achievements as a Christian poet. Father O’Connor finally called an end to Wentersdorf’s scholarly diatribes in his reply of August 21, 1970: “Karl, Thanks for your latest communication (Letter #6) on the Athenaeum story. . . . I must admit that I have thoroughly enjoyed reading all your communications and received a great deal of enlightenment. . . . However, I must warn you that at the end of Letter #10 I will expect to receive an examination of their contents, and, if passed successfully, I will demand three graduate credit hours for a course we will call ‘The Fabliau Genre’. Seriously, I do appreciate the trouble you have gone to.”⁷

Retirement

After Wentersdorf retired in 1987, he moved two or three years later to San Francisco. The city offered exactly what he wanted: a moderate climate, fine public transportation (already an awful driver, he was beginning to experience

trouble with his vision), and proximity to a neighborhood library as well as to the world-class library in nearby Berkeley (so that he could continue his research). For the rest of his life he lived life to the fullest in a rent-controlled apartment in Pacific Heights, near Mrs. Doubtfire's place and near what became a favorite restaurant, La Roulange, on Green Street. A movie buff, he frequented the local art theatres, made sure to see the newest releases (he loved the great 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*), and maintained an extensive personal collection of his favorites. And he loved opera—Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*, Strauss's *Salome*, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and the Ring Cycle. For years he taught English to Taiwanese students in the Bay Area, for he was everlastingly cosmopolitan, a man "who lived between worlds, Germany and England, the U. S. and Germany, and so on," recalled John Miller.

One of those grateful students taught him how to use a computer so he could more easily conduct his research. Wentersdorf's articles continued to appear until advancing macular degeneration gradually made it impossible for him to shop and read, even with a magnifying glass. Amazingly, a carefully and extensively researched piece on Heorot, the famous mead hall in *Beowulf*, appeared in 2007 in the prestigious *Studies in Philology*⁸; a short item on a disputed word in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* came out in the venerable *Studia Neophilologica* in 2009; and the *Chaucer Review* published an essay on "The

Miller's Tale" in 2009. On November 17, 2010 he wrote me with a copy of an essay on *Hamlet* that he wanted me to show to my Penn State colleague Linda Woodbridge for her opinion, since she was president of the Shakespeare Association. Woodbridge commended the argument, but Wentersdorf was unable to bring it to completion before he passed away, three days before his 96th birthday, on September 12, 2011.⁹

Through all this time in the Bay Area he maintained his relationships. I was only one of the many who visited him, he traveled frequently (though only with friends after 2000), and he reconnected with a former XU student, Mermaid Taverner, and Berkeley Bolt Hall Law School lecturer and legal historian, Charles McClain, who, in addition to directing him to people who could assist with legal matters, introduced him to other friends. In Cincinnati his students and colleagues had loved his conviviality, cooking expertise, and *joie de vivre*, and he always enjoyed throwing dinner parties for his Xavier friends—classics professor Robert Murray, English professors Ernest Fontana and Joe Feldhaus, theology professor Ken Eberhardt, former students Jim Luken, Brian Conly, and Dick Hague (and their spouses), among many others that I don't know about. That conviviality persisted in San Francisco. KPW never remarried after losing his beloved Anna, but he had plenty of women friends, including Paula Stehmer (nicknamed Twinkletoes) who had come by to cook a week's supply of meals for

him in Cincinnati and who now, with her husband, occasionally accompanied Karl on trips.

Conclusion

Wentersdorf wasn't perfect, of course. In addition to being a terrible driver, he typically insisted on offering me a serving of horrible Jägermeister from his refrigerator, as a supposedly healthful digestive. And the stubbornness associated with great scholars could sometimes express itself in his impatience with mediocrity and political stupidity.

But my daughters still think of him as pretty close to perfect. Once, in the mid-1990s, my wife Linda and I took our mercurial pre-teens to San Francisco over Spring Break. Karl dropped everything so he could give us a day-long tour of The City, and attended to the kids at every turn. The beautiful day started with a brunch at a stunning rooftop restaurant overlooking the bay (his treat) and concluded with dinner at a place on Pier 39; Karl had chosen everything he could think of to interest the girls, and their best behavior betrayed how captivated they were by Karl's choices and deference. At the end they invited him to join us the next day (but he couldn't), and for years after—now it's been twenty-five years—they asked me regularly about him. They are among the youngest of his students: he was teaching them how to live.

Then again, they aren't exactly his youngest students. In the two years before my retirement, my department assigned me to teach all my favorite courses. Though I had never taught the subject before, I chose Chaucer as one of those swan songs—with my undergrad notes from Wentersdorf's class as my primary guide. The students claimed in their evaluations that they truly enjoyed the course—how can you not love “The Canterbury Tales”?—and so you can rest assured that out there somewhere there are now high school English teachers passing on Wentersdorf to another generation.

[Photos: I have a hard copy photo of him in SF. There's an earlier photo of him in the file with my XU news stories. Photos of Karl and Molly/Maggie in SF. Photos in Wessling's materials.]

Notes

¹ Some sources place Wentersdorf's birth in Windek, near Bonn, but he told me on March 11, 2009, that he was in fact born in Oberschleisien. Perhaps the upheavals associated with World War I, which claimed his father's life in 1917, forced his mother to relocate further west. I also interviewed Karl Wentersdorf informally on other occasions, and this essay draws from those talks and from our correspondence. In addition, for

their assistance with this article, especially by sharing materials and reminiscences, I am grateful to many others, especially KPW's son Tony; Xavier faculty colleague Joseph Wessling; Xavier archivist Thomas Kennealy, S.J.; Charles McClain; and John Miller, HAB '72 (now professor of classics at the University of Virginia).

² Karl told me they even tried administering extracts derived from mistletoe, but nothing could save Anna. All the information contained in this segment derives from my interviews with Karl Wentersdorf over the last two decades of his life, and from my communications with Tony Wentersdorf.

³ Heinrich Mutschmann (1885-1955), a prolific scholar, published many books and articles on John Milton, English philology, and other topics; some of them are still available via Amazon. *Shakespeare and Catholicism* appeared in 1950 after a portion was published in 1948 in volume 142 of *Stimmen der Zeit*. Evenhanded, thorough, and impressively researched, the book—which concludes that Shakespeare's plays “were conceived and composed in a thoroughly Christian and Catholic spirit” (368)—was translated into English in 1952 by Sheed and Ward; it enjoyed twelve editions and remains influential (and available via Amazon) to this day. It seems clear to me that Mutschmann was a professional model for KPW as his career was getting started.

⁴ To figure out if the marriage of Romeo and Juliet was valid, he studied the clandestine marriage of The Fair Maid of Kent to the Black Prince in the fourteenth century. The details of the match are maintained in the Vatican's secret archives, which an Irish Jesuit steered him to and which were then guarded by an Italian priest. (“They don't like to advertise their secrets,” Karl confided to me with his usual wry smile.) Anyway, the overseer was making things hard on Karl, doling things out very slowly “according to policy,” until Karl befriended the library's Big Boss, who happened to be German. “Just show the Italian these initials,” he told KPW, and the doors then sprung open. The results appeared in the *Journal of Medieval History* in 1979.

⁵ I still have the folders, in case anyone is interested in investigating “The Jeweled Serpent in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*” or “The Flies in Milton's *Paradise Regained*” or

"Satan's Disguises in *Paradise Lost*" or the Irish analogues to any number of the *Canterbury Tales*.

⁶ Wentersdorf lived near Xavier, at 1457 Dana Avenue across from the Herald Avenue entrance, until moving to the Williamsburg Apartments in the Hartwell area of Cincinnati in the late 1960s. French professor Joseph Bourgeois and his wife Jeanne were close friends and neighbors on Dana, and KPW sometimes babysat for the Bourgeois kids.

⁷ And now that the statute of limitations has passed, I can disclose the coda to the story, based on my personal observation. Students were outraged that copies of the "Putnam County" issue were supposedly confiscated, but in fact it was just that one of the students charged with distributing the magazines forgot to do so. He had left them in the trunk of his car by mistake! When I told this to Wentersdorf, he gave me his whole file on the episode, which I have contributed to the Xavier archives.

⁸ I offered very minimal assistance on it because of Karl's eye troubles. In a heart-breaking note (December 2, 2005), he had asked me to serve as proofreader of the page proofs, "in case I might not be available . . . (yes, time marches on)." More substantial assistance was provided by John F. Miller and his graduate students in the Department of Classics at the University of Virginia (personal correspondence, December 11, 2005) as well as others.

⁹ His ashes are interred in a plot at Cypress Lawn Cemetery, Colma, California.